Article

CBR

Currents in Biblical Research
10(3) 396–409

DOI: 10.1177/1476993X10397593
cbi.sagepub.com
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The Second-Century Reception of John: A Survey of Methodologies*

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Abstract
The last sixty years have witnessed quite different results on the topic of the reception of the Fourth Gospel in the second century. It is however at hand to notice that these significantly differing results are indebted to the dissimilar methodological approaches assumed by each scholar. The main aim of this paper is to reassess methodologically the bibliography on the reception of John in the second century. Given that we are far from having a consensus on the question of how to seek for John in the earliest Christian texts, some concluding considerations are offered on future possible development of the topic.

Introduction

The quantity of the Johannine material to be found in the second century is expectedly conditioned by the chronology of the texts involved. This situation is further aggravated by the issue of dating John and of dating the texts largely assigned to that time.

As far as the Greek text of John is concerned, until recently the established *terminus post quem* for its composition would have been the year 90, and the *terminus ante quem* 140: the traditional date of around 100 CE 'is probably very near to

* An initial version of this article was presented as a paper at *Retelling the Bible. Interdisciplinary workshop organised by the Center for Theoretical Study, Charles University in Prague*, Prague, September 2008. However, the present article is a revised form of the follow-up paper presented at the *SBL International Meeting*, Rome, 2009. I am grateful to Andrew Gregory and Charles Hill for their comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this paper.

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the truth' (Barrett 1982: 127-28). This position was largely based on the dating around 125 CE of what was thought to be the earliest New Testament papyrus—P^{52}. However, this dating has been recently contested; the new proposed dating for P^{52} has been moved down to late second and early third century with the result that the mentioned papyrus 'cannot be used as evidence to silence other debates about the existence (or non-existence) of the Gospel of John in the first half of the second century' (Nongbri 2005: 46). Although Nongbri does not put forward a new date for the composition of John, a later date than the traditional one is altogether possible.

When looking to recent discussions of dating of text that are customarily ascribed to the end of the first and the beginning of the second century, one can find that the dating is critical for the topic under discussion. For instance, in the case of *1 Clement*, text which is assigned traditionally to the last part of the first century, it has been recently proposed that it is in fact possible that the *terminus a quo* be brought in the 70s and the *ante quem* past the second half of the second century (Gregory 2006: 227-28). *Didache* is in a similar situation (Draper 2006: 177-78), and perhaps so are some parts of the *Shepherd of Hermas* (Osiek 1999: 18-20). Such texts are therefore more or less contemporaneous with John. Consequently, even the earliest possible date of John, 90 CE, renders it not all that easy for the earliest Christian authors to have had the chance to read the Fourth Gospel before redacting their own works. It is only fair to acknowledge that there are smaller chances to find evidence of the use of John in these texts.

It has been noted that formal markers for quotations are generally lacking (see discussion in Gregory and Tuckett 2005a: 63-70) and that even when they appear they are hardly reliable: one can find *1 Clement* 17 and *2 Clement* 14, instances where the intention to quote an authority is clear—for instance a saying of Jesus—but we today cannot identify the source at all (Ehrman 2003: 67, 189). As a result, there has been a recent attempt to define a functional terminology for assessing this, where a *reference* denotes a general 'apparent use of one text in another'; a *quotation* a 'significant degree of verbal identity with the source cited' and an *allusion* stands for an instance that contains 'less verbal identity' (Gregory and Tuckett 2005a: 64). There is no need to determine more closely the differences between the last ones, as any of the two—either *quotation* or *allusion*—'if established, may each be sufficient to indicate the use of the New Testament, directly or indirectly, in the Apostolic Fathers' (2005a: 65).

The Case For

In the following I will briefly present a number of methodological stances of scholars that have assessed the here proposed topic, scholars who have started from the Greek texts offered in our modern text editions. Although their

approaches are very different in presuppositions and results, they illustrate together a case *for*, in that they consider that it is in fact possible to find John in even the earliest Christian texts, and set out to see if, and to what extent this is verifiable. A case *against* will follow.

But before that, it is observable that the scholars seeking traces of John's influence in the larger frame of the second-century writings follow, more or less, two paradigms (Gregory 2003: 5-15; Gregory and Tuckett 2005a: 71-76; Bellinzoni 2005: 46-48 and 51-52): one maximalist, the other minimalist. E. Massaux and H. Köster illustrate them respectively.

The Maximalist Approach

The exponent for the first paradigm may well be Édouard Massaux: in 1950 he published an important book on the influence of Matthew's Gospel in the Christian literature before Irenaeus, in which he gave an account on the influence, in this period, of all New Testament texts, including John. His methodological stance presented in the introduction, concerning the *reception* or *influence* in a given text, is that the influence of the New Testament text is not to be confined only to strict literary contact between the alleged source and the posterior author but sought also in the simpler use of the source text's vocabulary, themes and ideas (Massaux 1986: xviii). A very striking feature of this perspective is perhaps that it presupposes that the second-century author knows the Gospel in discussion and goes on to measure the extent of the influence (Gregory and Tuckett 2005a: 71), as said, both in fragments with striking verbal agreement with the text of the Gospel, and in fragments that seem to contain some similarity in vocabulary, themes or ideas.

A few years later, F.-M. Braun published a monograph on John and his Gospel within the Early Church (1959), in which he furthers on Massaux's perspective. Taking the analysis of John's influence on the *Shepherd of Hermas* as an example, he concludes that since the influence of John on *Hermas* can be found without much effort on one or two occasions, it is only natural to extend this conclusion to other passages that seem of Johannine inspiration. He also advises cautiousness about being all too categorical about this and suggests a scenario in which the author of the *Shepherd* used around 140 CE the Fourth Gospel (1959: 170). Therefore, without being too categorical about it, he concludes that, on the one hand, verbal agreement ascertains the use of John by Hermas, and, on the other hand, this can be extended over the fragments where Hermas seems Johannine but has no verbal agreement.

A recent contribution to the topic of the reception of Fourth Gospel in the second century was published by Titus Nagel (2000). His book contains a methodological chapter of interest for the present survey (2000: 34-45). On the question of what can

be considered reception of the Fourth Gospel in a second-century text, Nagel draws mainly on Wolf-Dietrich Köhler's categories presented in his treatment of the presence of Matthew's Gospel before Irineus (Köhler 1987: 2-17). A critical appraisal of Köhler's perspective can be found in Gregory and Tuckett (2005a: 71-74), who place Köhler's methodological results in the vicinity of those of Massaux.

As far as the textual reception is concerned, Nagel notes that while close citations can be found in the second half of the second century, it is not the same situation in the first half of that century (2000: 37-38). He mentions in this respect Papias who speaks about written Gospel texts but also seeks oral traditions as authoritative (2000: 38) and compares this with the fact that Justin generally cites the Gospels more carefully than the Apostolic Fathers (2000: 39). He further discusses various grades of using a source text: verbal resemblance without identity of content, parallel ideas without verbal agreement, mention of the source author, and mention of the source text (2000: 39-40). Nagel also presents a number of categories for assessing possible reception of ideas and contents (2000: 41-42), and proposes criteria for establishing reception of the Fourth Gospel in this line (2000: 42-45).

In an even more recent contribution to the subject, Charles Hill (2004) analyses the presence of the Johannine corpus in the second century. His aim is to challenge the long-established opinion—in the scholarship on the Fourth Gospel—according to which John was initially preferred by the heterodox milieu and rejected by the orthodox one in the Early Church. Considering this, his concern is not to ask whether a certain textual similarity can be said to be the *use* of one text in another; it would suffice for him to establish that the questioned second-century author *had knowledge* of the Johannine corpus.

In a programmatic presentation of his method, Hill seems to list among the established yet perhaps debatable takes on issue of reception the possibility that—in paralleled passages—the resemblances are indebted to dependence on commune sources rather than on one another (2004: 67). He further challenges its starting point, namely the requirement of having strong verbal agreement in order to establish literary contact, as a possible projection of modern structures on ancient texts (2004: 68), stressing that the custom in antiquity was not the usually expected exact quote but indeed imperfect quotation (2004: 68-70).

Nevertheless, in assessing the influence of one text on another,

> much will depend upon factors such as the length or level of detail of the parallel material, the secondary author's use of elements characteristic of or unique to the proposed source, the presence of other reminiscences from the same source, contextual references or allusions to the (presumed) author of the source, a comparison with the author's use of OT or other NT sources, and other contextual features which might reflect on the probability of the secondary author's knowledge of the proposed source. The question of possible alternative sources, whether oral or written, must also frequently come into play (2004: 70).

When applying this, the emphasis may be not as much on the textual reception as on the knowledge of the supposed source text. If we take as an example Hill's treatment of the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the text reads: 'It appears likely, then, that the author *did know* the Fourth Gospel' (emphasis added) at least when he wrote the part of the *Shepherd* that is generally considered to be the last written part, the 9th *Similitude* (2004: 380).

Hill further develops methodological considerations in a recent contribution (2010: 235-42) where he states that, for his investigation, quoting or paraphrasing is of lesser importance than the question of 'whether we can say, with any kind of assurance that the author knows the Gospel of John' (2010: 236).

The Minimalist Approach

At the opposite end of the same *pro* case one may find what is here called *the minimalist approach*. Perhaps the most important feature of this approach is its emphasis on the importance in discussion of the sources of the alleged source text itself. As long as, for example, *Diognetus* reads something that is also present in the text of John, and in John is allegedly identified as coming from one of his sources, the question remains open whether *Diognetus* is dependent on John, or both *Diognetus* and John draw independently on the same source. While it is true, as seen above, that this issue is not entirely missing in the works of the scholars here grouped under the *maximalist approach* heading, the emphasis on the sources leads to significantly different results as far as the quantity of proven evidence for the reception of John is concerned.

J.N. Sanders published—prior to Massaux's book—an inquiry of the presence of the Gospel of John in the period before Irenaeus (1943). He starts by reassessing the relation of the Gospel of John to the Johannine epistles and notes before moving on to the Apostolic Fathers: 'the Johannine epistles afford an example of works very close in temper and outlook to the Gospel which *yet are not* dependent of it' (emphasis added), pointing to the fact that 'the general tone of the Gospel was characteristic of a number of writers, who did *not* acquire it from the Fourth Gospel' (emphasis added). Accordingly, 'common temper or outlook is not sufficient to prove actual knowledge of the Gospel' (1943: 11). In this context, an important part is played by the discussion of whether a similarity is due to dependence, or to independent use of the same tradition.

For instance, when he analyses Ignatius' relation to John and comes across fragments of Johannine ring, Sanders simply says: the examples 'illustrate clearly their general theological affinity but it is open to question if they demonstrate anything more' (1943: 12), before concluding that 'one cannot say with any certainty that Ignatius knew our Fourth Gospel' (1943: 13). It is worth noting that Massaux reaches rather similar results on Ignatius (1986: 112-17), being

maximalist only in that he discusses double the number of examples, compared to Snyder. But see Hill who concludes his own analysis saying that 'Ignatius's knowledge of John can be taken as proved' (2004: 442).

A decade later Helmut Köster (1957) radicalizes this approach in stating a criterion by which the dependence of one text on another can be assessed. Within this admittedly minimalist approach, Köster's mentioned book—and reiterated in Koester (1994: 297)—places the solution of the problem in redactional criticism: his criterion states that a reading can only be considered a certain use in one text of another, if that reading is an identifiable redactional particularity of the alleged source text. The main implication is that if strong verbal agreement is found between the two texts, but is not a sure case of a redactional element of the latter, this cannot point to dependence but, at most, to a commune source. Compared to Massaux, who seems to firstly assume the knowledge and use of the New Testament book and then to proceed measuring its extent, Köster 'sets out to determine whether the use of the gospels may be established at all' (Gregory and Tuckett 2005a: 71).

It is precisely this fact that makes this section *minimalist*: in instances where one can find, in a second-century text, a strong verbal agreement with the Gospel, but in the Gospel that fragment is not a verifiable redactional element, it would not stand as confirmed use of that Gospel, since it might simply indicate the dependence on the source of the Gospel. So is the approach of Hillmer (1966).

More recently A. Gregory and C. Tuckett reassessed the methodology concerning the problematic of reception (2005b). They offer a programmatic essay, which may be found in a recent collection of essays focused on the reception of the New Testament in the Apostolic Fathers.

It should be said that the contributors to this volume who analyse the relation between the New Testament and a specific Apostolic Father, when they turn to John, they generally question Hill's conclusions. Paul Foster on Ignatius notices Hill's emphasis on Ignatius' *knowledge* rather than *use* of John, and that, in doing this, his approach contains not only textual but also historical considerations (2005: 184). Michael W. Holmes on Polycarp, with regard to Hill's position that a dependence on John is very probable, estimates that 'an argument composed by compounding possibilities...is simply not compelling' (2005a: 199). Finally, Joseph Verheyden on the *Shepherd of Hermas* also notices the prevalence of knowing the ideas of John over the literary contact and places Hill near Massaux (2005: 319).

Gregory and Tuckett also present and compare Massaux with Köster and emphasize the importance of Köster's criterion. Their discussion also includes Köhler (1987). In their view the latter's methodological stance proposes a more cautious and detailed approach that considers both Massaux and Köster, but which reaches nonetheless similar results to those of Massaux's approach (Gregory and Tuckett 2005a: 74).

In this line, Gregory and Tuckett warn against the 'risk of reaching potentially maximalist results by an uncritical application of a methodology akin to what Neirynck called Massaux's principle of simplicity' (2005a: 74). Furthermore, they do not fail to acknowledge that the 'use of such criterion may be thought to weight research towards a minimalist end', while suggesting that 'it seems equally true that a less rigorous criterion may weight research towards a maximalist conclusion' (2005a: 75). Nevertheless, when they consider John, they mention cautiously that 'it is extremely difficult to apply Köster's criterion without first making other far-reaching decisions' (2005a: 79), seemingly on what might constitute redactional elements and sources in John.

Summarizing, the limitations of the 'Massaux approach' to the general problem of reception of John in the second century have been already formulated by scholars sensible to the importance of Köster's criterion: the general lack of clarity in distinguishing between what may come from the text of John itself, or independently on a different path from his sources, something that might lead to a 'tendency to parallelomania' (Gregory and Tuckett 2005a: 76).

There are limitations to Köster's criterion also. The first of them comes precisely from the fact that it is minimalist, and is assumed as such by its followers. I quote from Gregory and Tuckett: 'Given that we know so little about early transmission of the gospels in general, and given that so much of early Christian literature has been lost, it may be the case that a small sample of quite secure evidence may be of more value than a larger sample of less secure evidence' (2005a: 75).

One other limit, also acknowledged, comes from the fact that it is not at all easy to identify what, in the text of John or any other Gospel, is a redactional element, that is, a redactional change of a presumably used source when taking it into his text by the author of John. There is further critique in Hill (2010: 237-42, 244).

There is yet another perspective. It simply forms, by the means of its conclusion, the case *against*, as far as the possibility of discerning dependence of the second-century author on a New Testament text starting from the text we reconstruct today in our editions is concerned.

The Case Against

It should be said that one assumed presupposition, explicitly or not, by both minimalist and maximalist approaches described above is that 'any discussion of the possible dependence of one writing on another implies some degree of confidence that we have at least sufficient access to the form in which those texts were originally written to make meaningful judgments about possible relationships between them' (Gregory and Tuckett 2005a: 62). This is precisely the starting point of this approach: in order to be able to find rigorous dependences, one

needs to be confident about having—as working material—something very similar to the second-century text of a given book of the (future) New Testament, that is, the text that allegedly the second-century authors might have used.

And precisely this presupposition has been disputed. From the standing point of textual criticism, the Greek text of the New Testament our modern editions reconstruct is 'the text of the great uncials (c. 350) and the text of the third century' (Petersen 2005: 41, n. 38). Even if, in case of John, we do have more early witnesses than, for instance, Mark, this date may not get much earlier. And this would simply mean that we do not have access to the form of John that might have been used by Christian authors in the second century. In addition, with few exceptions, the manuscript evidence for the second-century authors is of an even later period. Moreover, there are signalled examples where the reading of a second-century author differs from what we read in the New Testament but are similar to the readings of other non-canonical texts of that age (2005: 42-43).

Furthermore, the texts that later will come to be named New Testament are, in the second century, most likely 'not yet "fixed"', rendering it rather impossible to state anything about the form of the New Testament texts of that period, and the early second-century authors might just be the witnesses of circulated versions of the Gospels that did not survive to us (2005: 43).

This circularity is produced where two neighbour disciplines overlap: reception is sought in redactional criticism, yet in the absence of the possibility to prove rather than to assume the possession of sufficient access to the primary forms of the text in the edition resulting from textual criticism. Yet this kind of circularity is not unusual; it is in fact paralleled in another crossroad of biblical studies, that of synoptic studies with textual criticism: even though the Two-Source Theory is a major one and in the larger field of New Testament not seldom considered *the* solution, it is not the only one, and—within the field of synoptic studies—it is far from being accepted as the only possible hypothesis, as it is still challenged on both accounts, the Markan Priority and the existence of Q (Goodacre 2007: 23-24; Batovici 2009). Yet, the second out of the first three things a textual critic is advised to take into account as far as the Gospels are concerned, is—according to Metzger's textual commentary on the New Testament—'the priority of the Gospel according to Mark' (Metzger 1994: 14*; Head 2011). The result is that allegedly different synoptic scholars in their arguments use this text, among others. It should be noted, however, that in both cases the 'circularly' argued perspectives proved extremely productive in each of their fields, and, most likely, will prove so further on.

The suggestion from this perspective (focused on the Apostolic Fathers) is that the advance of scholarship on the matter should lead to a reformulation of the initial inquiry, from 'for which books of the New Testament is there evidence in the Apostolic Fathers?' to 'what textual parallels are there for the recognizable passages in the Apostolic Fathers, and what these parallels tell us about the

textual complexion of the documents...that were known to the Apostolic Fathers?' (Petersen 2005: 45; original emphasis). This would move the accent from the *textual reception* of John onto *the dynamics of the traditions* that include John, in the second century.

Conclusive Remarks

A number of observations are in order pertaining to the above presentation:

1. The *case against*, briefly presented above, proposes a reexamination of this part of the material, inquiring—as seen—not as much about the dependence on John, as about what information on the second-century text of John can we gather from the parallel fragments in the later author, with regard to textual criticism. This perspective has nevertheless at least to face the weight of its own argument: while it is true that we do not have sufficient access to second-century evidence for the yet-fluid text of John, the same thing is true about the textual tradition of any second-century author, with the result that it is perhaps not that easy to decide what exactly is the material for a viable comparison. While the approach may well prove productive in the future, those who will assume it will most likely experience difficulties in pinning down the problem starting from the extant material.

2. As far as the *case for* is concerned, it would be perhaps worthwhile pursuing a study that utilizes, seemingly in different sections, both approaches—maximalist *and* minimalist. In such case, it might be best thus to keep the discussion consistent with each one of the presented methodologies: should one find enough material in a given second-century author to ascertain the presence of identifiable redactional material from John, one might argue *dependence* on and *use* of John. Should one find only material that rather falls under the more permissive sides of an approach akin to that of Massaux—and most of the material comparable to John in second-century authors is in this situation—one should be very wary about claiming *dependence* (or *knowledge*, for that matter): a common source is always a possibility (Sanders 1943: 11; Hillmer 1966; Hakola 2010: 18; Czachesz 2010: 50, 65; Turner 2010: 106, 109).

Yet the question of how each of the two approaches would be applicable in the case of John begs further considerations.

a. Koester's criterion is, to our understanding, imagined as a solution which responds to specific synoptic issues: should one find a fragment resembling to Mark, it is still to be shown why it wouldn't be borrowed from one of the parallel fragments in the other two Synoptic Gospels. Redactional criticism is proposed as a solution to address that question. Although we do have studies on the sources of John (e.g. van Belle 1994), there is so far no text which might act for the Fourth Gospel as either Mark or Q do for Luke and Matthew in the Two-Source Theory; nor as Matthew (and Luke) acts for Mark in the Griesbach Theory.

Considering this, the *minimalist* criterion might just prove to be a *negative* one as far as the reception of John in the second century is concerned.

Furthermore, the question as to what constitutes redactional elements in John remains however open, due to each scholar's position on how much to attribute to tradition and how much to the creativity of the author of John, in absence of sources with which to compare its text. For a discussion of this see Hill (2010: 238). Perhaps what is usually considered to be editorial additions to John could make a good start. A possible example of how this issue may be addressed can be found in a parallel discussion on Mark of David B. Peabody, whose approach aims to identify recurrent and habitual phraseology as redactional features of the author of Mark (Peabody 1987).

The question according to this criterion is nonetheless necessary, however limited applicability it might have in the case of John. As an example, in a study on the gospel passion narrative reception in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, Michael W. Holmes acknowledges that 'the "strict", or "minimalist" approach is required by the history of the canon', yet also shows that although the application of this criterion to the question of the gospel reception in *Martirium Polycarpi* does not lead towards any ascertained results, 'this negative conclusion to a very precise, targeted question is hardly, of course, the whole story' (2005b: 418).

b. Indeed, there is material that would only make it in the discussion when a 'maximalist' approach is assumed. The extent of this material is significant and will most likely prove the most productive part in future scholarship on the reception of John in the second century, but all discussion should remain cautious and all judgments relative. As said, one should be very wary about claiming *dependence* or *knowledge*, in the absence of positive results at the scrutiny of the 'minimalist' criterion.

Parallel traditions are, nevertheless, in the larger context of the second century, also important theologically, to say the least. Such a perspective would seek the significance of similarities that are yet not ascertainable dependences. Such parallels at the levels of ideas might not be directly relevant for studies aiming to demonstrate the reception of John in the second century, yet the presence of theological issues akin to those from John in texts of the second century is in itself relevant.

An example is afforded by C. Claussen's article on the Eucharist in John and in the *Didache* (2005), which notices that the Synoptic Gospels and the first Pauline letter to the Corinthians might not be the suitable context for the proper understanding of the Johannine Eucharistic fragments, since John does not have an account of the Last Supper. Claussen then examines the Eucharistic prayers in *Didache* against the background of Jewish meal-prayers and then the background of the terminology used in *Didache* 9–10, with the result that some terms are better understood in a Hellenistic-Jewish context while others in a Christian one.

When turning to the Eucharistic fragments of the Gospel of John, several areas present parallels with the fragments of the *Didache* on this topic that form a better understanding of the former: 'similarities in wording and theology make it quite likely that the Fourth Gospel and the *Didache* may be seen as belonging to the same liturgical tradition' (2005: 162-63).

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